

The Coalition Against Religious Discrimination

September 19, 2005

OPPOSE ANY AMENDMENT TO REPEAL LONGSTANDING, CRITICAL CIVIL RIGHTS PROTECTIONS IN HEAD START PROGRAM

VOTE "NO" ON FINAL PASSAGE OF H.R. 2123 IF ANTI-CIVIL RIGHTS AMENDMENT IS ADOPTED

Dear Representative:

We, the undersigned religious, civil rights, labor, education, health, and advocacy organizations are writing to urge you **to oppose any amendment to repeal longstanding critical civil rights protections contained in the School Readiness Act (H.R. 2123) and vote "no" on final passage if such an amendment is adopted.** As unanimously passed out of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, H.R. 2123 maintains longstanding provisions designed to protect over 198,000 Head Start teachers and staff and over 1,450,000 parent volunteers from employment discrimination based on religion in federally-funded positions in Head Start programs.

The critical longstanding nondiscrimination provisions have been included in Head Start legislation since 1972. This is a fundamental civil rights protection against employment discrimination for Head Start teachers and volunteers. The legislation always has received strong bipartisan support from both the House and Senate since its enactment in the 92nd Congress when President Nixon signed the legislation into law. The thirty-three year old civil rights provision has worked effectively since the inception of this program, allowing religious organizations to participate in programs while maintaining constitutional and civil rights standards.

We are pleased that the Committee-passed Head Start legislation maintains longstanding critical civil rights protections. However, we are troubled by the threat of repealing these protections on the House floor. In a statement released by the Committee on Education and the Workforce on May 5, 2005, the day H.R. 2123 was introduced, Chairman Boehner stated that he foresaw an amendment on the House floor to roll back longstanding critical civil rights protections. The civil rights protections afforded to Head Start teachers and staff are vital and should not be dislodged.

We recognize that religious organizations participating in the Head Start program make an invaluable contribution to the education of thousands of students. These religious organizations have complied with Head Start's existing civil rights requirements. However, if the repeal of the existing civil rights protections becomes law, teachers or parent volunteers working in any Head Start program run by a religious organization could potentially lose their jobs based only on their religion. Students participating in Head Start therefore could lose not only their teachers, but also the close programmatic connection with their own

parents volunteering in the program. We strongly believe that allowing discrimination based on religion would significantly impede the important goals of Head Start, send a damaging message to Head Start students, and harm their education by separating students from their own teachers and parent volunteers.

We urge you to maintain current law and reject any assault on civil rights protections in federally-funded programs, especially a program as critical as Head Start. If these longstanding critical civil rights protections are repealed we urge you to vote “no” on final passage of H.R. 2123. The dismantling of civil rights will destroy the nature of a program in which the education of young children is so dependent on parent participation and on ongoing, close relationships with Head Start teachers.

Sincerely,

AFL-CIO

African American Ministers in Action

American Association of University Women

American Civil Liberties Union

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

American Federation of Teachers

American Humanist Association

American Jewish Committee

American Jewish Congress

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)

Americans for Democratic Action

Americans for Religious Liberty

Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

Central Conference of American Rabbis

Children’s Defense Fund

Church Women United

Communications Workers of America

Disciples Justice Action Network (Disciples of Christ)

Equal Partners in Faith

Faith Action Network of People For the American Way

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church

Human Rights Campaign

International Union, UAW

Legal Momentum (formerly NOW Legal Defense)

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)

NA’AMAT USA

National Association of Social Workers

National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence

National Council of Jewish Women

National Council of Women’s Organizations

National Education Association
National Head Start Association
National Mental Health Association
National Organization of Women
National PTA
National Women's Law Center
OMB Watch
People For the American Way
Secular Coalition for America
Service Employees International Union
Stop Family Violence
Texas Faith Network
Texas Freedom Network
The Interfaith Alliance/ Foundation
The Secular Coalition for America
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists Association
Untied Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries
Women of Reform Judaism
YWCA USA